

# Storytelling in Early Language Teaching

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*By Natasha Malkina*

Stories are an effective tool for early language teaching. They meet the emotional, cognitive and psychological demands of pre-school children: their need to belong; to act; to share; to feel protected, etc. Stories and fairy tales are inherently interesting to children. They speak to the "I" of the child, as Bruno Bettelheim stated in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*.

However, an analysis of existing Russian educational materials for teaching English to kindergarten children shows that stories have been little used. If they are part of the curriculum, they are Russian translations of English or American stories and fairy tales. E. Garvie's *The Story as Vehicle*, presents the view that storytelling can be a major component in an acquisition-based language teaching approach. She discusses how to select stories, "unpacking" their language potential, adapting the stories to syllabus needs, and finding ways to tell them to foster comprehension, involvement and participation. A related work is *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* (Ellis et al.) which discusses the use of "real books," written for native-speaker children with students of EFL. The books by Hester *Stories in the Multilingual Primary Classroom*, and Rosen *And None of it Was Nonsense* are highly relevant, too.

In this article I will give a brief outline of the main points that should be considered when using storytelling at the elementary level, and share with you some of the ideas generated from my own teaching experience and observations.

The scarcity of research on the use of storytelling in the foreign-language classroom with young children may be partly explained by the complexity of the problem itself. If we look at the problem as a whole, the first dimension that comes into the picture is communication.

## Storytelling as Communication

Garvie sees communication succeeding if both the child and the storyteller are good language users. In her terms, a good language user possesses an awareness of

linguistic, psycholinguistic, discoursal, communicative, sociolinguistic, strategic, cognitive, and semantic features of the language.

Since the young learner is unlikely to be a good language user, teachers should provide a classroom environment that will stimulate thought and feeling while cultivating listening and speaking skills. Stories contribute to establishing that kind of environment.

We might theorize that storytelling is experience. This is both life experience and linguistic experience. The story mirrors the surrounding world and constructs a reality of its own, meeting the cognitive, psychological and emotional needs of the child. The Russian psychologist Zaporozhets pointed out that storytelling gives a child a play-like experience. He called their mental participation "active perception," believing that it enabled the child to enter the story, identify with its characters, and actively participate in all of its events.

## **Cultural Literacy**

The experience that storytelling offers is not only personal experience, it is a universal experience encompassing world cultures. Any story offers a cultural experience. Fairy tales are part of the lore of ordinary folk; modern stories mirror personal and/or national experiences.

A fresh look in the 1980s at the interconnection between culture and language has opened up a new dimension for foreign- language teaching methodology. Language has come to be viewed as a major means to acquire "cultural literacy," a term popularized by E. D. Hirsh. In early language teaching, storytelling can be one of the main tools for children to become culturally literate.

Like learning a foreign language, stories create a new image of the world. If we accept the premise that narrative is a child's main mode of making meaning about the world (Mallan), storytelling can be a powerful force in language teaching.

## **Story as Text**

The advantage of a story, as Garvie sees it, is that it is structured. It follows a course of development that is predictable.

Recent work in discourse analysis has been concerned with the structure of text. Text is viewed as having an outer and inner structure, the former represented by the sequence of sentences, and the latter by a sequence of "elementary meanings" (Kopylenko). In a wide sense, the story grammar comprises not only structure and form, but also meaning units that the reader/listener draws upon for understanding.

## **Storytelling as Comprehension**

Personal observation of classroom routines has given me new appreciation for the role of listening comprehension. Comprehension can be described as that process which enables the receiver to make meaning from verbal and non-verbal information. Non-verbal information may include background knowledge based on past experience or visual information (pictures). To understand how children comprehend aural text, we must discover what "clues" they pick up in the flow of speech to form a mental representation of the story. If there is no construction or rather reconstruction of meaning on the part of the child, the story will make no sense.

The point is to teach children "how to mean" in a foreign language. They can't construct or reconstruct meaning without prior experience with life and language, and they need language to cope with this new experience. With storytelling we must teach strategies for text comprehension.

## **Storytelling as a Coding-decoding Process**

This raises the concept of storytelling as a coding-decoding process. Comprehension occurs if the text is organized to enable the listener to decode it in the same way that the speaker-storyteller encoded the story (Kopylenko). There is a variety of opinions regarding coding and decoding information. Garvie suggests the idea of identifying main points which she calls "staging posts" to facilitate comprehension. The idea is wonderful in itself, but the teacher needs some assistance to know what these "staging posts" are, since they depend on the child's personal experience with language and life.

Garvie sees the following stages of development in a child's ability to comprehend:

1. The learner picks up "clues."
2. The learner develops coping skills.
3. The learner gets the gist of the message and much of the supporting detail.

During the first stage when the child's linguistic field is limited, s/he should be led to understanding by "guided comprehension" wherein words and pictures help the child reconstruct meaning. In this process, each child constructs his/her own story.

Bieva described how to map a child's comprehension of the story. She found that at the age of four to five, children are able to identify 50 percent of the story references when it is told in their mother tongue. She theorized that comprehension results when meaning units develop apart from discrete language units like words and phrases. My own observation and teaching experience backs up this view.

## Selection of Stories

Nobody questions how important the selection of stories is for successful storytelling. Our experience has demonstrated that though fairy tales and folk tales are appealing, they may be inadequate for teaching foreign languages because of their complicated and sometimes archaic language. We have been searching through various collections for tales with natural language and a traditional story grammar or rhetorical structure to make the story predictable-facilitating comprehension. In our situation, original children's stories were used, but the grammar was simplified; and the past tense was sometimes changed into present. I suggest that a suitable story might include chain structures-rhyming words, repetition, action words, sound words, etc.

The use of action words is important in storytelling since they allow children to respond both mentally and physically. Our observation demonstrated that children's physical involvement facilitates comprehension, giving the child a unique opportunity to identify with the characters. This was the case with the story *Caps for Sale*, a funny story about a man whose caps are stolen by monkeys when he falls asleep. Children acted like monkeys, imitating the seller's movements when he threatened them. This story was the most popular with our children, perhaps because of their full participation in it.

With young learners, partial understanding of stories is very often the case. In an action research project, children listened to the unadapted story *The Birthday Soup* by E. Minarik. This is a story about a little bear who is having his birthday party. Although the children grasped the general plot, they didn't understand why the bear was cooking soup. This is important because it suggests that understanding a concept like birthday soup requires a different level of comprehension; and if children are not helped to explore the concept, the whole story may be wasted. Some previous story orientation is necessary through questions, games, rhymes, etc. This is especially

important if we are aiming at introducing the child to a new reality through the medium of storytelling.

## Conclusion

These then, are the main points for using storytelling in early foreign-language teaching.

1. Storytelling should be viewed as an essential part of early language teaching. It gives a child rich and versatile experience with language and culture. Through storytelling, children acquire cultural literacy to make their language learning meaningful.
2. The curriculum for early language teaching can be story based.
3. Finding the right story is important. Story selection should meet certain objective and subjective criteria. Objective criteria relate to story grammar; subjective criteria relate to the child and his/her preferences. When selecting a story for early language teaching, objective criteria are the most important since they facilitate comprehension.
4. Text adaptation may be necessary to facilitate comprehension. A story should be adapted in such a way that a child can easily pick up clues or "staging posts" to construct the meaning.
5. Story comprehension and understanding is affected by the storytelling technique used. We don't know yet which technique is the most effective but it should lead to "guided comprehension."
6. Finally, guided comprehension is a process through which the child learns strategies for making meaning. The teacher's role is to help the child use different strategies and to adjust the storytelling process if s/he loses the meaning.

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